

April 1995

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Eleanor I. (1995) "Drinking from the Firehose: Gatekeepers & Private Lists, Or, Censorship & Country Clubs?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 24.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1736>

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Drinking from the Firehose

Gatekeepers & Private Lists, Or, Censorship & Country Clubs?

by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Librarian, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 COOKEI@APPSTATE.EDU)



There have been a number of debates in the academic literature recently about the nature of electronic bulletin boards and whether they should be open to all or to certain interested individuals. Questions have been raised about harassment, political correctness, commercial vs. public interest and the like. Some hard feelings have been the result in a few cases. [See sources at the end of this article.]

I have a firm notion that our electronic lives are parallel to our physical lives in so many ways. Everywhere we go, we meet and interact with people who astound, inspire, anger, annoy, delight, and bore us. Whether such encounters occur on the street, at work, online or through some other channel, you are sure to have an impression of everyone you encounter in any meaningful way. And so it is with electronic lists. Some people breeze through occasionally and you have little sense of their dimensions. Others are ever present and in time you cannot help but form an image of their character and personality based simply on the words they type on their keyboards.

Keeping all this mind, let us consider the nature of electronic lists. They are voluntary groupings of people who are interested in some topic. I say "voluntary" as I cannot imagine anyone being coerced to read a list (though one's supervisor may lean heavily, the "delete" key is always comfortably nearby.) The nature of list subscription is much like book, magazine, television or radio consumption. If not interested, don't subscribe. Censorship principles are similar to those with other media. As a librarian, I am committed to freedom from censorship, but as a consumer, I expect to feel confident in the choices I make. For example, if subscribing to a list related to vegetable gardening, I do not expect to find discussions about baseball, though I might not be surprised to encounter tangents related to soil conservation, insect control, or preserving and canning. Editorial definition is the name of the game.

There has been considerable controversy over sexually explicit lists. No one

should be surprised that these exist; this universally fascinating subject is present in all types of media and certainly will continue to exist in the future. If **Carnegie Mellon University** or other institutions of higher education choose to eliminate access to sexually explicit electronic lists to students, then perhaps, for consistency's sake, they should purge the library of all sexually explicit material also! I suspect this kind of censorship is not being handled consistently, and perhaps they need to rethink their policies.

Consistency is the key. Any group forming a philosophical canon of beliefs, behaviors and actions are bound by the restrictions they self-impose. You either accept or reject the parameters set by the group or you work to change them, if that is allowed (though sometimes it isn't).

The indignation over "closed" lists is a waste of time, in my opinion. There have always been closed clubs, groups, cliques, and the like within society. What is more important is clarity of purpose. If a list claims to be open and then its members behave in ways that are not, there is a conflict. Certainly many lists have been begun with the best intentions but without a clear purpose. A number of closed lists exist within spitting distance of those of us interested in acquisitions issues. Examples include the **Association of Research Libraries'** directors list, the **American Association of University Presses'** list, and the **North American Serials Interest Group** list. All these lists are potentially interesting to acquisitions librarians but they are not inviting us to join en masse; you have to be an official member of the group in order to subscribe.

The point here is that any list must be begun with a clear purpose and audience in mind. Certain behaviors are tolerated on some lists and not on others — so much like life! It is totally acceptable and expected behavior to stand up in the middle of a Quaker worship meeting and express some thought you have; it is not acceptable or expected for you to do this

in the middle of a movie theater. On electronic lists, the "netiquette" varies from list to list. On some, "flaming" is tolerated and on others it is not. "Spamming" is an obnoxious practice where hundreds of lists are sent the same message, usually a commercial or political message not at all related to the aims of the lists. Moderated lists avoid this by intercepting all messages before they are distributed to the subscribers, but moderation requires more up-front manipulation and some listowners do not want the extra work or feel that the list should be free and open to all subscribers.

None of these approaches are necessarily right or wrong, and as the community of subscribers evolves, so may the scope and purpose of the list. I am a member of a fledgling list that is grappling with such issues now. The list is ostensibly for the business of a professional organization, though not all members of the association have access to Internet. In order to foster openness and encourage people to sign up, there has been resistance to asking anyone to augment or limit postings, yet one person constantly re-posts messages from other lists to this list, a source of annoyance to many. However, a colleague who recently published a book on Internet resources targeted at a particular library audience told me that she discovered some valuable resources she had not seen elsewhere thanks to this frequent contributor. The bottom line: if you don't like it, hit the delete key.

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* "Point of View" column, **Jesse Lemisch** argues that first amendment rights are in jeopardy when moderated lists refuse to post dissenting points of view. The refusal may be because of a sense of "political correctness" or due to an (unnecessary) sense of protectiveness. Either way, he argues, people should have

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Group Therapy

Using One Vendor's Forms to Order From Another Vendor

Column Editor: **Rosann Bazirjian** (Syracuse University)

Hey y'all out there! Do you have any gripes?

Come to your therapist! Try rvbazirj@hawk.syr.edu or

FAX (315) 443-9510.



GRIPLE

Submitted by an **Anonymous Vendor**

My complaint is about libraries which receive form selections from a particular vendor and then they turn around and use the information received from that form selection to order the title from another vendor. I do not think that is ethical and wonder why this practice is followed by some librarians.

LIBRARIAN RESPONSE

Submitted by **Joe Barker** (Acquisition Department Head, The Library, University of California, Berkeley 94720) (jbarker@library.berkeley.edu).

I tend to agree with this griper. A lot of expense goes into the production of form selections; multi-part forms are not cheap. The vendor deserves to be compensated by getting most (if not all) of the orders triggered by these forms. It's only fair.

But nothing in library work is without exceptions. What if a library receives a notification slip from Vendor Q for a profile in physics, but the physics selector thinks the book is engineering, hates to throw things away, and sends the slip to the engineering selector, who likes the title. However, when the engineering library sends the slip to the Acquisition Department, the decision is made that this current imprint needs to be ordered "do-not-duplicate" from Vendor Z where engineering has an approval plan? We try to prevent this from happening at Berkeley by clustering overlapping subjects with the same

vendor and by careful profiling to get each selector all the slips she or he needs without costly referrals among selectors. But I cannot deny it does happen, albeit infrequently.

Or what if a library has an approval plan with Vendor K, who is an excellent approval plan dealer but a mediocre firm order dealer and this perception has been discussed with Vendor K? Along with the approval plan, Vendor K volunteers to send form selections outside the basic subject profile, knowing that the library only sends firm orders to Vendor K when duplication by the approval plan is likely. In my view, the library cannot be faulted here. I leave it up to the vendors to decide whether Vendor K has good business sense.

Another exception occurs when a vendor sends a notification slip for a run-of-the-mill publication from a country outside the vendor's. We do not require these forms, but we get them. When selectors choose these titles, we are likely to order from a vendor in the country of publication. I prefer to ask for forms or an approval plan from a good vendor in the country of publication.

Another perspective on this is that all form selections are a risk for vendors. Vendors can be seen as prospecting in supplying forms. Vendors should exercise the right to say "No." If the vendor who issued this gripe had the courage of his (her?) convictions, he would tell the "gripee" library that the forms are expensive to produce and cannot be supplied if so few orders result. If the vendor is afraid of losing business because of such a "just-say-no" attitude, then the vendor needs to look at his motives. If the customer is so important that the griper doesn't want to risk losing the gripee, then I wonder if the griper is being entirely fair. Vendors are in the business for profit, and decide which customers are important on the basis of factors other than the cost of some forms. Prospecting

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a right to present an alternative view to a subject being discussed. He says, "Ban the medium of flaming and you ban the message of dissent." That is certainly something to think about. The line between dissent and "gentility and decorum" is not the same for everyone. But how much should one tolerate? When dissent becomes verbal abuse then what?

It's like real life too — you have to deal with obnoxious people in all types of situations in everyday living. You can

avoid them or meet them head on and put a stop to it. Everyone has to deal with this occasionally. It is generally not against the law simply to BE obnoxious. However, electronic lists will continue to test legal bounds in terms of libel and slander and other similar litigious matters as time goes on.

When joining a new list, read the scope and purpose statement if there is one. If there isn't, be aware that one may need to be developed and that questions will inevitably arise. As a subscriber, you should get involved and provide feedback to the listowner. And if after all else fails and you are unhappy about

the direction a list you are interested in is taking, you can always take your ball and go home and start your own list!

Sources: (all from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*)

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Wilson, David L. "Vigilantes Gain Quiet Approval on Networks," Jan. 13, 1995, pp.A17-19.

Lemisch, Jesse. "The First Amendment is Under Attack in Cyberspace," Jan. 20, 1995, p.A56.